Mark Shields

Too Soon to Gloat

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Before sending their Maximum Speaker off on his multi-city book tour, with a schedule that would make his publishers happy as well as most rock stars envious, and before taking off for the rest of August, House Republicans—in a choreographed display of ideological stupidity—voted to cut Head Start funds for those American 4- and 5-year-olds whose obvious lack of entrepreneurial initiative had left them without the price of tuition at a good polo camp.

In addition, Republican candidates are hungrily raising so much political action committee campaign money that they will be forced to run next November as "dependents." Then comes the Vanity Fair magazine flap over author Gail Sheehy's allegations that before he became Maximum Speaker, Newt Gingrich, as a married congressional candidate, behaved in a way that could both make the "character issue" radioactive for the GOP and the Republicans' favorite new charity, the Congressional Home for Wayward Members.

The public polls are showing a marked souring toward the new Republican congressional stewardship, and Democrats, with their own unsuppressed delight at the GOP's self-inflicted headaches listed above are—for reasons that elude this observer—suddenly feeling vindicated. Before they succumb to terminal gloating, Democrats need to remember what a historic beating their party took at the hands of the nation's voters just nine months ago.

The numbers are devastating: Democrats lost a net of 52 seats in the U.S. House and nine seats in the U.S. Senate. They also lost a net of 14 governorships, and 18 state legislative houses switched from Democratic to Republican.

The once-solid Democratic South is now solidly Republican in presidential races and increasingly Republican in congressional contests. In 1994, for only the second time in history, GOP candidates won a higher percentage of the two-party vote in the South than they did in the rest of the country. In the 11 states of the Old Confederacy, after 1992, there were 77 Democrats and 48 Republicans in Congress. After 1994, there were only 61 Democrats and 64 Republicans.

The historic dimensions of the 1994 Republican landslide—in the face of an improving national economy and a nation at peace—were understood by Prof. Walter Dean Burnham of the University of Texas, who points out that while just "38.4 percent of Americans had been living under Republican governors before the election, fully 71.8 percent were doing so following the 1994 upheaval."

Burnham consoles no Democrats with the news that in 1994, of the 31 open House seats held by retiring Democratic members, the Republicans captured 21, which, with the exception of the Whig Party's implosion, represented the largest proportional loss of open seats held by any American party since the founding of the Republic.

American voters have lost confidence in the federal government's ability to make tangible, pragmatic and sensible progress in solving the nation's problems. Voters doubt that higher taxes or higher spending is the answer to the social breakdown they see around them. In an atmosphere of severely diminished public confidence in our collective ability to solve national problems, Democrats, the party of energetic government, find themselves at an enormous disadvantage. Democrats cannot win an affirmative mandate to lead in such a pervasive mood of pessimism.

Anxiety increases among the citizenry. The apprehension is continental: We have lost control of our economic destiny. People look in vain for political leadership that can confidently and clearly explain: "Here's how your kids are going to earn a good living in the 21st century, and here's what we are going to do now to make sure they can."

Republican excesses and hypocrisies may be enough for the Democrats to win a national election. But before they can truly lead the nation, the challenge for Democrats is to prove they can make government work for working American families. And first, they have to convince themselves.

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